

EARLY CHILDHOOD SPECIALIST

Classroom-Based Model

The Early Childhood Specialist (ECS) is the catalyst for continuous quality improvement for each Great Start Readiness Program (GSRP). The ECS must have sufficient time to devote to the process of observing and evaluating the program and supporting classroom staff to meet the goals set for the program and the children. Specialized knowledge is needed to fulfill this role; the ECS must have a graduate degree in early childhood education or child development, five or more years of relevant job experience, and specific professional development. The ECS must have or acquire knowledge of the *Early Childhood Standards of Quality for Pre-Kindergarten* (ECSQ-PK), and have or achieve status as a reliable assessor in the *Preschool Program Quality Assessment* (PQA), as well as formal training in the selected curriculum and child assessment and screening tools of the grantee.

Some grantees contract with a qualified ECS to carry out the requirements specific to the program and other grantees are fortunate to have the services of an ECS year-round. The grantee must provide one ECS for every 12-15 classrooms, depending on such factors as distance between classrooms, number of classrooms per building, etc. The ratio must be planned so the ECS can fulfill the requirements of the role. One person may not be employed to fill both a lead teacher position and an early childhood specialist position by the same subrecipient. The program administrator may be the ECS, if qualified. Use of the term ECS throughout this document refers to a singular ECS or to the multiple members of an ECS team.

GSRP requires that the program be evaluated to provide answers to a few key questions:

- What is working and what needs to be improved?
- What professional development does staff need to be fully prepared to carry out the program?
- What experiences need to be added or improved in the classroom for the children?
- Does the program get the results it should for the children?
- Are parents engaged as active decision makers for the program and in an exchange of information around goal setting and progress for their children?

The ECS sets the stage for answering these questions by observing classrooms using the PQA Form A as a tool to document evidence of practice in the areas of the classroom environment, daily routine, adult/child interactions, and curriculum planning and assessment. Form B is completed by reviewing children's files/documentation and through interviews that may include administrators, teachers, and parents. The ECS gives relevant feedback on PQA results to the teaching team and offers support for improvement. Additionally, the ECS mentors staff to carry out the curriculum and ongoing child assessment with fidelity. The ECS also designs a meaningful professional development plan for the year, taking into account the individual needs of the staff, as well as the overall training needed.

The ECS assembles and leads a team made up of lead and associate teachers (or representatives of those groups in a large program), the program supervisor, parents, and other relevant personnel. The team periodically analyzes program data including PQA scores and ongoing child assessment results. This team sets and monitors goals for the continuous quality improvement of the program. It meets multiple times per year to monitor progress and reports program results to the local GSRP Advisory Committee, school or agency board, and the public. See the Program Evaluation section of the Implementation Manual for additional information about program evaluation requirements and responsibilities of the data analysis team.

Using the PQA throughout the Year

Both the ECS and classroom staff receive training in the use of the PQA, ensuring shared understanding of the elements of a quality program and how documentation is collected to determine accurate scoring. Only an ECS who is a certified PQA reliable assessor completes the observations, interviews and scoring of the OnlinePQA for the MDE.

To accomplish this, a program evaluation calendar should be designed. Though it may be created by the ECS and/or classroom staff, it should be presented annually to the local Advisory Committee for input. This ensures their support of the process. A recommended evaluation calendar can be found in the resources for the Program Evaluation section.

Between March and May the ECS completes the observation of each classroom using Form A of the PQA and one Form B for the overall program. Form B is usually completed during a team interview with the program supervisor, members of the teaching teams, and parents. Form A usually takes one full class period per classroom with a small amount of additional time when the team's attention does not have to be on the children to answer questions about items that weren't observed. When possible, taking photos of the classroom environment is an efficient way to provide documentation for later scoring. The ECS should set up a time to meet with the teaching team for feedback on the results within two weeks. At that time, the ECS and team set classroom-level goals and develop a plan for continuous improvement that may include professional development and modifications to the classroom environment.

Shortly after the school year has started and the teaching team and children have adjusted, the ECS schedules a visit to each classroom to review the results from the full PQA that was completed the previous spring when the program- and classroom-level goals were developed. An observation with feedback centered on those goals takes place. Feedback is again given and support offered toward meeting goals and operating a high-quality classroom. It is especially important for this first visit to occur early in the school year for newly hired teachers.

During the year, the ECS should use the PQA at least once more to monitor progress toward meeting the goals. If the results are less than expected in relation to program- or classroom-level goals, the continuous improvement plan should be modified.

When the end-of-year PQA is completed in the spring and beginning and ending child assessment data is aggregated, final progress toward the year's designated goals will be measured. This will provide gain scores which will be used to evaluate the success in meeting the designated program- and classroom-level goals. These data reveal program strengths and challenges to use as the basis for further program improvement efforts. At this time, the team that analyzes data and sets goals will choose program-wide goals for the following school year and update or re-create a plan to reach those goals. Information relating to both the status of meeting the current year's goals and the goals set for the following year should be shared with local advisory committee, parents, staff, administration, the school board, and public.

Continuous Improvement Plan

Once goals are identified, the ECS works with the team to develop a plan to achieve the goals. A successful plan will:

- Identify the goal;
- Identify related PQA indicator or child outcome objective;
- Set strategies and activities to improve teacher knowledge, supply needed materials, and make changes in classroom(s);
- Include specific timelines and a person responsible for each activity; and
- Determine how progress will be measured (e.g., Will move from score of three (3) to four (4) on the PQA).

The ECS makes sure all materials needed to meet the goals will be in classrooms in time for the start of the new year, and that all training designated is included in the professional development plan for the upcoming year.

The ECS as Program Advocate

Another important role in program quality played by the ECS is that of advocate. As a person knowledgeable of the ECSQ-PK, GSRP requirements, the curriculum, ongoing assessment, and PQA results, the ECS advocates for the program when decisions are being made so all decision makers are aware of best practices for operating a high-quality program.

The Role of the Early Childhood Contact

As part of administering GSRP, the Intermediate School District (ISD) will designate an Early Childhood Contact (ECC) who will connect with the programs through the ECS to work toward an ISD-wide plan for continuous quality improvement. In some cases that person may also serve as the ECS. In others, the ECC will collect data on the curricula, screening and child assessment tools used in the area. The ECC will be able to access, aggregate and analyze OnlinePQA information which can be used to support those serving in the ECS role across the ISD. This information along with PQA results may inform the creation of an area-wide professional development plan.